

WRITING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT SEX

— ELIZABETH FENWICK

Like most parents, we told each other we'd talk honestly to our children about sex. We'd answer their questions, we'd never show embarrassment. The principle was right, though it didn't always work out quite as we thought it would. Our three-year-old son was once heard disseminating information to a visiting 18-month-old with whom he was sharing a bath. "I have a penis and you haven't," he was telling her, "because you're not a boy—yet."

However, even allowing for misunderstandings and misinformation, the early years are relatively simple. Small children are interested in facts, and facts are easy. But as they grow older, it becomes more complicated. Honesty involves more than facts. It involves implications and moral issues, acceptance of differing points of view and questions of personal choice and responsibility. Like all parents we wanted to keep our children safe. We wanted to protect them. We wanted, let's face it, to leap up onto a soap box and shout out all the unpermissible things like, "Don't do it," and "Because I say so."

It was because we knew how parents felt, because we *were* parents, that we wanted to write our book. We had also discovered that, although infancy is an island of development entirely surrounded by good advice, there are few helpful handbooks available for the anxious parents of the adolescent. It seemed like a good idea to write our own.

When we began we had, between us, six teenage children. And besides our own two families there were others—our friends, who also had teenagers, and who also had problems. These provided the data base on which we could draw to illustrate almost any situation you'd like to mention.

It was a book with a long gestation period—ten

years to be precise—a book repeatedly put on the back burner as our publishers brought what they felt were more pressing matters to our attention. But this was all to the good. It meant that we had the whole story. We watched them grow up, bring home their first boyfriends and girlfriends. And by the time it was finished we had between us six delightful young adults and we realized that we had been right to give the book a happy ending and a positive message—that with love, goodwill, and a modicum of common sense, a family can survive and even enjoy the teenage years.

Partners in the Intergenerational Dialogue

Sexuality is always going to be a big issue between parents and children. When parents say they want to protect their child, what they often really mean is that they want them to stay children a while longer. We are not ready to think of them as sexual—it makes *us* feel uncomfortable to think about them in a sexual relationship. Maybe we don't feel they are ready to cope with the emotional risks of being an adult. Maybe we realize their sex life is an area we can't control, however much we would like to. So what we are really talking about is our own very powerful feelings about sex—and those should remain our problem, not theirs.

Are the sex lives of teenagers today so very different from those of their parents? Certainly, as a group teenagers behave very differently. They talk about sex more openly, at least among themselves. They become sexually active earlier. In Britain the median age for first intercourse for girls has fallen by four years in the last four decades (from 21 for women born between 1936 and 1940 to 17 for those born between 1966 and

1975). The trend is similar for boys—the median age for first intercourse for boys aged 16-19 is 17.3, three years earlier than it was for men now aged 55-59. And as might be expected, the numbers of young people who now have intercourse before the age of 16 (the age of consent in Britain) has also risen dramatically. Although these figures are from British surveys, most previous studies have indicated little difference between British and American populations in this respect. There is little reason to doubt that the sexual behaviour of American teenagers is following a similar trend.

And yet as individuals teenagers probably have not changed that much. They still worry about the same things that teenagers have always worried about. Few of them are promiscuous. And the old double standard still operates: a girl who sleeps about is a slag, a boy who does the same is a stud. They are still idealistic, they still value relationship, but are too young and inexperienced for these to last. So they fall in love, and relationships break down, and they suffer the same heartache as we did, just as often, just as acutely. The questions I am asked as a telephone counsellor are much the same as those I would have been asked 10 or 20 years ago. Girls still ask "He wants me to go all the way and I don't know what to do..." They are perhaps not so likely to feel they need permission to say yes, but they do sometimes seem to feel they need permission to say no.

What really has changed is the society they live in. Teenagers are no more immune from the influence of those changes than any other members of that society. The dubious moral messages of films and videos, the example of their elders, none of these makes for good role model material. The apparent expectations of this kind of society make it more difficult for teenagers to trust their own instincts when these run counter to what seems to be the norm. No one really knows what the ground rules are any more. If girls have not quite realized that their sexual freedom includes the freedom to

say no, boys have yet to learn that if a girl says no they have to take the blow to their macho image like a man.

Ten or twenty years ago the concept of children's rights was scarcely acknowledged. But even though parents may accept that these include the right of teenagers to make their own mistakes, they do not have to opt out. On the contrary, they have an even greater responsibility to make sure their children have the information they need to avoid making mistakes. This includes knowing that relationships between very young people are usually short-lived, that a relationship needs more than even the most extreme sexual passion if it is to last. It means teaching them that they have to shoulder responsibility for themselves and their own actions. It may mean coming to terms with the fact that there are other ways than your own for someone to find personal and sexual happiness—perhaps accepting that your child is gay or lesbian, for example.

We wrote our book originally for a British audience. In the UK we still have to deal with an Establishment that believes that ignorance is synonymous with innocence, that the less you tell children, the fewer will be their opportunities for getting into trouble. There is still a strong lobby that believes, in the teeth of the evidence, that teaching children about contraception is the surest way to encourage them to have sex.

Contraception stops people becoming pregnant. It does not influence their decision about whether or not to have sex. I wish it did. Most teenagers do not use birth control when they first start to have sex—and the younger they are the less likely they are to do so. They only think about it a few months later—too often when a missed period has scared them out of their complacency. The decision to start having sex is driven by love, lust, sexual curiosity, high blood alcohol, low self-esteem, the fear of being an odd-ball—it's a long list but it does not include such practicalities as having easy

access to a packet of condoms. The fear of pregnancy does not actually stop people having sex, any more than knowledge about birth control encourages them. Teenagers worry about getting pregnant *after* they've had sex, usually quite soon after. Beforehand, they know with sublime certainty that it's not going to happen to them.

Teenagers are always going to be driven more by their own feelings than by the niggling thought of their parents' proscriptions, warnings, prohibitions. Your best shot is at least to make sure that they understand their own feelings—that they know how to say no, that they are not so concerned about their image that they ignore their own instincts about what feels right for them, that they do not have to depend on sex for the love and boosts to self-esteem that everyone needs.

Writers of Fiction, Tellers of Truth

How should writers for teenagers treat sexuality—or indeed, should they deal with it at all? Indeed they must, if they want to be read. Anyone who is at all involved with sex education knows that teenagers are still surprisingly ignorant about sex. Formal education in schools, however good, can only teach them so much. Informal talks with parents who are prepared to be honest and open with them can teach them much more. But fiction is an avenue which is always available. Remember (if you are honest) the countless hours you spent in adolescence, skipping through any adult books you could lay your hands on till you came to the sexy bits. As a method of sex education it left a lot to be desired and was responsible for a good deal of misinformation. Very seldom did it deal with real sex, real people, and real relationships.

Writers for teenagers have a marvellous opportunity and a huge responsibility to tell it to them like it is. It would be unforgivable for a writer

for teenagers to subscribe to the kind of fantasy view of sex so often depicted by adult writers. There's a view that it is permissible to write a simple romantic love story, whereas writing about, say, teenage pregnancy is irresponsible because it "glamorizes" it. It is, of course, the reverse which is true. Writing about reality seldom glamorizes, and a story that tells the real heartache and the agonizing dilemmas facing a pregnant schoolgirl may act as more of a deterrent than anything a moralizing adult could say. What is irresponsible is to glamorize romance, to lead a susceptible 16-year-old to think that the grand passion he or she feels right now is likely to last an entire lifetime.

What is needed is a kind of magic realism. *Of course* teenagers are romantic, and a sensitive writer can show that though romance is a wonderful part of a relationship, it is not, in itself, enough. Fiction can explore the reasons why some relationships work and others are nonstarters. It can provide insights into the emotional lives of both boys and girls, since in real life they so often signally fail to understand each other, or even to speak the same language.

Teenage fiction should show teenagers grappling with real emotions and real problems—even with problems we hope they will not have to deal with in reality. Adolescence can be a lonely time simply because teenagers don't always recognize that other people of their age feel as shy, as self-conscious, sometimes even as plain and as unloved as they do. Fiction can help them understand that the turmoil of emotions which seems so strange to them is in fact commonplace. Those of us who love books and who want our children to love them too will value any writer who can capture an audience of teenagers and tell them something worthwhile about life, about other people, and about themselves.

Elizabeth Fenwick is the author of several successful books for young people, including Adolescence: The Survival Guide for Parents and Teenagers (with Dr. Tony Smith, 1993), and How Sex Works (with Richard Walker, 1994, both published by Dorling Kindersley).

This article was published in *Bookbird* Vol. 32, No. 2—Summer 1994